



State of Montana cancels licenses to 700 MHz public-safety narrowband spectrum

May 21, 2014 Donny Jackson | Urgent Communications | <http://urgentcomm.com/spectrumfrequency-coordination/state-montana-cancels-licenses-700-mhz-public-safety-narrowband-spect>

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Under current rules, state licensees of 700 MHz public-safety narrowband spectrum must demonstrate to the FCC's public-safety and homeland-security bureau that they are providing—or are prepared to provide—"substantial service" to at least one-third of their population or territory by June 13. State governments that do not meet this buildout threshold by June 13 will be subject to losing their licenses to the airwaves.

With no 700 MHz public-safety narrowband system in the state of Montana and no plans to deploy such a network, the state of Montana opted to ask the FCC to cancel its licenses to the 96 channels in the 700 MHz band, according to Scott Bradford, communication- technology manager for the state of Montana's department of administration.

"For some time, we've known that we—as a state—were not going to deploy the spectrum in the required time," Bradford said during an interview with IWCE's Urgent Communications. "I contacted the FCC to get their recommendation whether I should just wait until the deadline to let it lapse. They suggested that I go ahead and cancel the license.

"After the deadline, that spectrum will revert back to the regional planning committees. The FCC indicated that they would issue guidance for the regional planning committees after the deadline on how to incorporate that into their plans."

There is need for public-safety spectrum in Montana, but the propagation characteristics and other economic realities of 700 MHz frequencies do not make it practical to build a network using the spectrum, Bradford said.

"We have a need for spectrum up here, but the problem is that all agencies—except for the city of Billings, which uses 800 MHz—are VHF [systems]," he said.

Although the state's license to 700 MHz narrowband spectrum has been canceled, Bradford said he does not believe that the airwaves really have been lost permanently.

"In a situation like ours—and there may be other states that have vast rural areas that are going to be in a similar circumstance—you don't lose the spectrum," Bradford said. "The spectrum goes into the regional planning committees, so state agencies and locals can still access that, as part of the planning process.

"So, for us, it would not be the same loss as a state agency working in an urban area [where the airwaves might be claimed and utilized by other agencies]."